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By Lesley Mahoney

Set deep off Route 14, it looks like any ordinary house. On the outside, that is. Walk inside and the kitchen is as complete as any kitchen could be with a sink, stove, table and chairs. But instead of people, there are cats, lots of cats roaming around this otherwise normal kitchen.

On the table. On the chairs. On the counters. Perched on the windowsill. A white cat named Calypso limps across the table, minus one rear paw, possibly lost to a steel-jaw trap. Truly at home, these cats roam freely about the kitchen, also known as the "great room."

And all over the rest of the house, for that matter. Every nook and cranny of the house, with the exception of the bathrooms, is covered, wall-to-wall, cage-to-cage, with cats.

To the 50 to 60 felines in residence at any time in this tidy, two-story abode — which, not surprisingly,

smells decidedly but not offensively like cats — there are between two and five volunteers cleaning the house and tending to the cats' needs. A full-time tenant, who doubles as a volunteer, lives there as well.

Known as the Holmes House, this no-kill cat shelter run by the Standish Humane Society offers an alternative to euthanasia for homeless cats. The shelter draws its residents primarily from the South Shore but also houses cats from the rest of the commonwealth and other states.

Downstairs, room five is reserved for what the staff considers a rowdy bunch of cats. They bounce around the newly installed shelves, which shelter director Suellen Conlon says they love. The open cages allow the cats to wander around the room, its walls decorated with cat stencils.

Sybil sits in a bed with a pink blanket canopy, a silent observer taking in the scene. Conlon explains that this calico feline is appropriately named because of her multiple personalities.

She should know. Conlon, a veteri-

nary technician at a veterinary hospital during the day, spends most of her free time at the shelter. And she knows each of the cats by name.

A cat named Bill Bowes (so called after Duxbury's animal control officer, who brought the cat to Holmes House) and another named Onyx scurry across the room.

Ellen Callahan, a Marshfield resident who volunteers on Saturdays, cleans one of the litter boxes.

"I come in once a week to feed and love the cats," she says. "It is wonderful to come, knowing you are doing something meaningful."

Callahan's love for animals is also evident at home, where she has 10 cats

Standish secretary Marilyn Phillips and volunteers Jan O'Hara and Kim Hunt tend to the cats in room five, reserved for Holmes House's rowdier guests.

Staff Photos by Chris Bernstein

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of her own — so many that there is no space for additional cats. But a few weeks ago, when Callahan was eating breakfast at a restaurant off a main highway, she could not ignore a stray cat who was trying to get inside. Luckily, there was space at Holmes House.

Callahan described picking up the cat, whom she named Batman for the Halloween season.

"It crawled into my lap in the car, purring as if to say, 'Thanks for saving me,'" she says.

In less than a week, Batman found a home.

In the hallway, Callahan points out Buggy, who workers say is a "special-needs" cat. This orange and white Persian feline has an extremely flat face, which the volunteers think may have resulted from poor breeding.

Buggy needs special care. Every time he eats, he makes snorting sounds and gets food all over his face. He uses flat dishes and bowls to accommodate his flat face.

But Callahan points out that Buggy is very friendly and gets along well with the other cats.

"Buggy needs special attention," she says. "Buggy just needs love."

Space for Homeless Cats

Named for the late Elizabeth Holmes of Duxbury, the founder and first president of the Standish Humane Society, the Holmes House opened in March 1990.

The Standish Humane Society was founded in 1969 as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization of volunteers dedicated to the care and placement of lost and abandoned pets in southeastern Massachusetts. Its reduced-cost spay/neuter program and placement program were created to help reduce euthanization — statistics show that 16 million cats are euthanized each year in the United States — as well as pet overpopulation.

The society's secretary, Marilyn Phillips, says the purchase of the Holmes House from private owners was finally made possible after 25 years of "scrounging, scrimping and saving" through donations, membership, small foundation grants and money left in a will that accrued over time.

Holmes House was created out of what was perceived as an overwhelming need to offer shelter to homeless cats. According to Conlon, dog overpopulation is not as big a problem.

While dog owners tend to be more responsible with spaying and neutering their pets, she says, most pounds shelter dogs but not cats.

A poster on the wall produced by SPAY/NEUTER, U.S.A. shows the ramifications of not

spaying or neutering cats. According to the poster, one female cat's cumulative offspring, through numerous generations, could total more than 80 million in 10 years.

Because of limited space, the Holmes House provides shelter for only a small percentage of the area's homeless cats. According to Conlon, most others are directed to local Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) locations at the rate of 50 to 100 per day. She says MSPCA branches are left no choice but to euthanize the cats because there simply is not enough room to house them all.

According to the poster, "millions of unwanted and homeless cats are born in this country each year. During the peak of the kitten season — from late April through September — pounds and humane shelters kill unwanted and abandoned cats at the rate of over one per minute."

The Adoption Process

Finding love and good homes for cats is what Standish is all about. Every Saturday, prospective cat owners come to Holmes House in the hope of adopting a cat.

Cathleen Wieckowski promised her daughter, Stasia, a new cat for her 14th birthday last April. But because the family was moving from Hingham to Weymouth, they decided to wait until they were settled in their new home before selecting a new pet.

When the move was complete, they set up an appointment to visit the cat shelter. As Wieckowski explains, they had visited Holmes House before in search of a cat for her mother, who had just lost a cat. Her mother ultimately decided she did not want to replace her late feline, but Wieckowski had been so impressed with the shelter that she vowed to return if her family — including son Stephan, 11, and daughter Alina, 7 — ever wanted another cat.

On this visit, Stasia chooses Honeybun, an American short-hair tabby with a white belly and a black and brown back.

"She went on my lap right away," Stasia says, smiling from ear to ear.

"Honeybun is very comfortable with the children," says Sally Yurgelun, who specializes in cat adoptions at the shelter. "It is something you can see right away."

But while Yurgelun, who sports a cat sweatshirt, is clearly pleased with the match, she points out that a successful adoption is not as simple as Honeybun taking a liking to Stasia's lap.



A cat is right at home against a backdrop of a larger-than-life feline image.

In her six years at Holmes House, Yurgelun has become familiar with the personalities of all of the cats as they come and go. In guiding adoptions, it is her job to carefully weigh the compatibility of the potential pets and their prospective owners.

"I love being able to get to know the animals and place them in the right environment with the right family," she says.

This is a big reason the Wieckowskis chose Holmes House.

"We're getting the cat here because the staff knows their personalities," Cathleen Wieckowski says. "It is not because you hold a cat and it wants to be held. The people here know. At this shelter, you are not taking a chance. I feel confident in their guidance."

In the Wieckowskis' case, a friendly female cat was ideal to complement their male cat and female dog.

Parting Is Bittersweet

For the people who work at Holmes House, adoptions can be bittersweet.

"I really miss them," Yurgelun says of the cats, "but I am happy at the same time."

When she housed kittens in foster care, she says, she "cried with each one as it left."

Some cats may never leave Holmes House. Curled up in a box in the office off the kitchen, Tess has lived at the shelter for six years. Volunteers think she may never be adopted because she is old; however, a family does pay her expenses through the society's

sponsorship program. People can sponsor an individual cat for \$10 a month, which covers the cat's daily and veterinary needs.

Yurgelun arrived about the same time as Tess. She first became involved with the shelter when she attended an open house about six years ago. She was so impressed with the well-kept grounds and cats that she was moved to volunteer on the spot. In addition, she was looking to transfer some of the experience she had gained while tending to her own pets, including a cat who needed a lot of veterinary care.

"Because of what my cat went through," she says, "I wanted to share this in a positive way."

Yurgelun, and other volunteers are imperfect to successful adoptions, but the screening process for prospective adopters begins long before they enter the shelter. Selection in a pet shop tends to be impulsive, Conlon explains, but adopting a cat from Holmes House involves a very particular and careful process.

Phillips screens all calls from those who wish to adopt. She needs to make sure the people are willing to spay or neuter their pets if the animals have not already had the operation.

"We're very fussy," she says.

All cats at Holmes House are vaccinated for distemper, upper-respiratory disease and rabies; checked by a veterinarian; tested for feline leukemia and feline immune deficiency virus; wormed; and sterilized if they are old enough. Any injuries are repaired as well.

If the cats are under six months, or "child" cats, the new owners must leave Standish a \$25 spay/neuter deposit. The money is either returned once the pet has had the operation or put toward the reduced-cost program at Standish. In addition to the \$25 deposit, child cats cost \$25 to adopt. Adults — fully spayed or neutered, vaccinated and tested — are \$50.

Phillips also screens the calls from those who want to place cats

in the shelter. She explains that while everyone who calls feels her situation is unique, "you simply can't help everyone."

Exceeding the shelter's capacity would put it wide open to disease, staffers say.

That is the reason no kittens are allowed in the shelter. Instead, they are channeled into foster homes. People volunteer to open their homes to the kittens until they are adopted or room opens up in the shelter when they are more than five months old.

Phillips says she enjoys her job thoroughly.

"It makes you feel as if you're doing something very worthwhile," says the secretary, who traces

her love for animals back to her childhood.

"I grew up in a household with very caring parents who always took in poor and unfortunate animals," she says. "I remember one winter, a squirrel lived on our porch."

The staff's efforts are sweetly rewarded when families send letters and pictures of the cats they have adopted. Bulletin boards are covered with these updates and thank-yous.

Affordable Spaying and Neutering

Phillips and Conlon are extremely proud of the Standish Humane Society's spay/neuter program, which enables families to afford spaying or neutering for their pets.

Last year, Standish spent more than \$30,000 on its spay/neuter program, which helped more than 2,000 animals. Through the humane society, a cat whose family qualifies for financial assistance can be spayed or neutered for about \$30 for a male or \$50 for a female. Conlon says these services are traditionally offered at double that price.

Spaying and neutering, Phillips says, is an essential first step in controlling cat overpopulation.

Both Phillips and Conlon chalk up the failure to spay or neuter cats to ignorance, irresponsibility and lack of funds.

"All this suffering is needless," Phillips says.



Calypso, with cats.

Calypso, perched on a table in the kitchen, also known as the "great room." A stray, he is missing his right rear paw, believed to be the result of an encounter with a steel-jaw trap.

LOOKING FOR VOLUNTEERS

The Standish Humane Society's Holmes House is always looking for volunteers, and there is also a need for people to foster kittens out of their homes.

Duties at Holmes House include cleaning, feeding and socializing with cats. No technical skills are required, and training is provided.

Morning shifts begin at 8 a.m., and evening shifts start between 4 and 6 p.m. Volunteers able to give one morning or evening each week, or one each month, are asked to call the shelter at (617)-834-4663.